



*Illustrated by A. H. BUCKLAND.*

THE letter was rolled round a brass knob that seemed to have belonged to a bedstead, and secured with a narrow ribbon of white silk, soiled and frayed. It was printed rather than written—that is to say, the letters were of the shape which printers use, and they seemed to be formed by some blunt instrument dipped in a curious reddish-brown ink.

It fell at my feet as I walked in my garden between the white-blossomed espaliers. I looked up to see who had thrown it, but in all the circle of blossoming gardens and red roofs that surrounded me nothing moved. It was Easter Sunday, and all the good people were at church. Though I am but forty-five, I have just enough of gout to keep me from walking a mile to church, and I paced slowly with my stick in the green and white garden. The letter ran—

“Whoever finds this is implored to help me. I am shut up in the attic of the White House. If you ask for me at the door she will kill me, but anyone could climb to the window along the roofs. My window looks over the laundry. I can see no window from it. For God’s sake come and help a wretched girl who trusts you.”

It was written on a piece of wall paper where faded roses struggled over blue and white stripes.

Now, I am forty-five, as I said, and have no mind for adventures, and as for climb-

ing along roofs, my gout settled that question—though twenty-five years before I had had good reason to know that one could indeed climb to that window of the White House which overlooked the laundry. Many a time I had done it, lured by the dear face that I knew would be waiting me there. Well, it was all over long ago; her shrewish elder sister had scolded her into marrying someone else—and I also had married. Yet the thought that it was from *that* window that this letter had been tossed across the roofs worried me a little. I told myself that I ought to be sure that it was a hoax, but I was not sure. The owner of the White House, that same shrewish sister, was more than a little eccentric. What if she were frightening some poor maidservant into submission as she had frightened my poor Valeria five and twenty years ago?

I walked among the pear trees pondering till my boy came home from church. Then I showed him the letter.

“Here’s an adventure for you, dad,” said he. “Who says the days of romance are over?”

“Do you think it’s a hoax?” I asked.

“Probably; but the excuse for trespassing on the roof of Miss Rowsley’s laundry is too good to throw away.”

He carved the Easter lamb with brisk exactness and passed me my plate as he said—

“You’ll go, of course?”

“Don’t mock my gout and my grey hairs.

Do you know, lad, that letter gives me the heartache?"

And I told him about the window, and how I had climbed to it twenty-five years before. When I had finished the story he merely said, "Good old dad," and helped himself to more lamb; but I saw that he meant in his turn to climb to that window. He spent most of the day with that piece of wall-paper in his hand, and once he said, "This ink is a very curious colour."

I let him alone. My boy John is one to think a matter out thoroughly. I knew I could trust him to do the best thing possible. If it had not been for him I think I should have been tempted to disregard the injunction of the letter, and, going boldly up the High Street, to knock at the green door of the White House, demanding, in plain terms, whether Miss Rowsley had a wretched girl imprisoned in the attics. But John was of another mind.

"Either take it as a hoax and let it alone, or take it seriously," said he. "If we take it seriously we must do exactly as she says. Miss Rowsley is mad enough for anything—with her tracts and her Wesleyan missions, and her home for distressed cats." This last, a neat building just outside the town, was indeed Miss Rowsley's latest eccentricity.

Towards evening John grew more talkative, and I knew that now everything was settled in his mind, for my boy never could talk when he was thinking.

When eleven o'clock came, and the maids had gone to bed, John said, "Come, father," and we went out together. I should have felt a quarter of a century younger but for the ache in my heart that was always there, but John has told me since that for his part he felt like a burglar's apprentice.

Our little town is nine miles from a railway, and folk keep primitive hours there. Not a window blinked light at us from the dark gables round about as we went down our garden and through our stable-yard and into the stable. At the back of the stable is a window closed by a wooden shutter. It was nailed up securely many a long year ago.



"Then up the baking-house door."

I found that John had drawn the nails during the day. Now he opened the wooden shutter a very little way and we peeped through into the flagged yard that lies at the side of the White House.

"There is only one window on this side of the house," I whispered, "the pear tree on the wall has grown very much. You could almost climb up by that. I remember planting that pear tree."

My John climbed on to our chicken-house

by means of the water-butt, and thence on to the roof of our stable. He had taken off his boots, and the curled tiles gave a foothold secure enough, as I knew. I had always thought that, barefooted, you could walk on tiles without making a sound. It seems so when you are doing it yourself. But now, as I stood holding my breath in the stable below, it seemed to me that the cracking and clattering John made would presently bring the whole town out to listen and wonder. I went back to the wooden window, and presently the stable roof gave one last loud crack and the beam of it groaned. Then I saw John creeping along the roof of Miss Rowsley's bakehouse, and then he got his knee on the wall—just as I used to do—and so climbed to the laundry roof. I could just see him under the window holding on to the window-ledge and rustling at the panes with a bit of the blossoming pear-tree that he had broken off.

Then I saw the window open. There was something white there. I strained my ears, but I could not hear even a whisper.

Then John came back along the laundry roof. He dropped into the yard and came under the wooden window.

"Will you go back and get a file—two files?" he whispered. "We must get her out. Either the old lady's mad, or *she's* mad, or *I* am. Anyway, we must get her out. Do get that file. There are bars to that confounded window."

"Yes, I remember that there are bars," I said, and I went to fetch the files. I brought two.

John was waiting for me below the wooden window. He climbed up again by the baking-house door. And now I could hear a whisper in the silence of the scented April night—the whisper of the file and the iron bars.

No one who has not crouched in a manger watching through a wooden window the filing of iron bars can form any idea of the tediousness of the operation. I longed to climb after John, to snatch the file from him and to show him how the thing ought to be done. But I controlled my impatience. Forty-five is not a very ripe age, but gout and trouble age one. I was not sure that I could manage the baking-house door. It is difficult to climb a door that swings about, and may, at the least false touch, clatter reverberating bolts and latch against the wall behind it. Strange that twenty-five years should make one so old. But I lost my first love, and my wife, dear, gentle

woman, only lived the year of our marriage out; if she had lived she might have taught me to forget and so kept me young.

I listened to the whisper of the file, and presently I saw that John's position had changed—he was filing the second bar.

Then suddenly the darkness and the silence were shattered by a bright light and the high voice of an angry woman. I knew that voice, and I remembered the words in the letter, "She will kill me!" and before I was conscious of my own purpose I had turned and dropped from the wooden window on to the paving-slabs of the yard below—dropped with all my weight on my gouty foot, and I swear I never felt so much as a twinge. Then up the baking-house door—never mind how the bolts rattled now—and clattering in my boots over the tiled roof to where my boy John crouched, filing at the second bar. I caught up the second file from the window-ledge—the first had not yet worn blunt—and filed at the top of the bar; and inside the room the angry voice rose and fell. As I got the file into its groove I turned my eyes towards the room within. In a corner behind an old chest and a pile of sacks crouched a white figure, rags of lace and ribbon I could distinguish, and a dark head, but the face was hidden.

In the middle of the floor stood Miss Rowsley, without her cap—it was long since I had seen her without cap or bonnet—her grey, disordered hair hanging on her shoulders. She wore a grey dressing-gown; in one hand she held a candle and in the other a long carving knife. This sounds a little comic, perhaps—or cheaply melodramatic. It did not seem so to my John and me. We remembered the words of the letter, "She will kill me!" and we saw that white figure crouching before the grey-haired fury. Miss Rowsley's features were swollen and distorted; her lips moved more than was needed for speech. She did not hear, or did not heed, the strong undertone of the busy files.

"So I've caught you at last!" she was saying, holding the candle aslant till the grease dripped in slow drops to the floor. "You *wouldn't* be warned. You *would* encourage your lover. Get up and let me see your wicked face, you shameless baggage. Ah, that I should ever have to say it of a sister of mine!"

"Mad as a hatter," whispered John, filing away furiously.

"You shan't live to disgrace your family," the old woman went on; "John Warburton's



"So I've caught you at last!"



no match for you, and I'd sooner see you in your shroud. I'll give you one more chance. Will you marry Edward Neale?"

Then I understood. The woman was indeed mad, and was now going over, in part at least, some scene of twenty-five years ago, in which her sister, my boyhood's love, had played a part. My poor Valeria—my poor, timid Valeria!

The crouching figure moved, took its hands from its face, I saw the face quite unmistakably, quite plainly. And the face was my Valeria's as I remembered it all those years before, only not now lit with the pretty lights of hope and love, but pale and shadowed with the terror of death.

"I will promise anything you like," she whispered breathlessly.

And now the files had done their work, the bar bent in and snapped, and I thank God that I, and not John, got my knee first over the window ledge and was in the room and holding the mad woman by her elbows before she could raise the knife to me. John came after, picked up the candle and lighted it again.

"We got your letter," he said in quite an ordinary tone to the girl, who now leaned against the chest, with eyes wide open and breast heaving with laboured breath.

"What is it all about?" I asked.

"I don't know," said the girl in a whisper, and the grey-haired woman writhed in my grasp. I tightened my fingers on her right arm till she dropped the knife. She did not speak to us—only struggled dumbly like some animal trapped.

"She is my aunt," the girl went on. "My father and mother died two years ago. I was coming to live with her. She wrote such kind letters; and when I came she met me at a station a long drive away, and when I came to this house she brought me up here and asked me to promise to give half my father's fortune to missionaries and distressed cats, and when I would not, she locked me up. It is three days since."

"Why didn't you scream?" asked John.

"She would have come before anyone else could, and she would have killed me—you know she would. The next day she seemed to have forgotten about the cats and things, and began to talk of lovers and all sorts of strange talk; then I knew she was quite mad. Oh, take me away, take me away!" She began to cry helplessly.

John looked at me.

"I suppose I had better fetch the police," he said quietly.

Then the woman I held cried out—

"No, no, you shall marry her, if you will. Oh, John, forgive me, dear! I did it for your sake—because I loved you so—but you never would look at me."

She suddenly turned and laid her faded face against mine.

"Dear John, forgive me," she said. "I'll be a good sister to you both now."

"I shall fetch the police," said John before I could speak.

I suppose the shock of her sudden confession—remember how much it meant, and how it explained the mysteries of so many years!—must have caused me to loosen my grasp, for as John spoke the woman suddenly broke from my hands, sprang to the window—I saw her huddled form a moment on the ledge as I sprang after her—then she fell in a heap from the window—we saw her fall—on to the laundry roof, and thence to the ground. She never moved again. When John did at last fetch the police there was nothing for them to do. She was dead.

I suppose you think that Valeria married my John, and that I spent my life a contented spectator of their happiness. This never seems to have even occurred to either of them. You see, though John did most of the filing, I happened to be the first to enter that room, and Valeria insists that it was I who saved her life. As for me, only one face in the world and one name have ever charmed me. Valeria possesses both. I feel a little hesitation and shyness in stating plainly that it was I, and not my boy John, who married Valeria. She was twenty-three, and I forty-five at the time of our marriage, but I have had no gout since that fateful Easter, and Valeria says I am growing younger. She herself looks older than her years, because the horror of those three days—when she did not know from hour to hour when the madness of killing would seize her gaoler—has left white streaks in the black of her soft hair. Valeria says she could never have loved anyone but me, and to me it seems only that I loved Valeria twenty-five years ago in a dream, now, thank God, fulfilled. I still keep the letter which brought me the only enduring happiness of my life. It is written, as I said, with a curiously blunt instrument in strangely coloured ink. That blunt instrument was a splinter of wood from the old window frame, the brown ink was the blood of my Valeria.